

Schools as Learning Communities.

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‘The true enemy of man is generalisation’ is a quote from the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz. We need to talk of *individuals*, we need to respect what each person brings and only generalize to the extent that doing so helps his or her individuality. In recent years education has become a kind of engineering, but it would appear that this is gradually changing and coming to an end. Whether this happens through evolution or revolution remains to be seen, but this transformation is especially in evidence through working with young children and through the way we as adults work together socially. Paulo Freire, author of ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’, highlighted the two extremes of modern citizenship and society: the affluent and the oppressed. We know that human existence can only be nourished by truth. We also know that to exist humanely is to *name* the world. This begs the question: how do we ‘name’ things correctly? The way in which we do this is very important because naming can change things and there are many false names that can be adverse.

The struggle for the true word goes on all the time and this is exactly the work of the poet, trying to name things in a truthful way. A recent conference in Madrid spoke of the ‘scissors effect’, an acknowledgement of the similarities in the plights of those under 24 and those over 55. One generation is finding nothing to do and no work to go to; the other is being cast aside. Both are asking ‘What is my role? Where can I be productive?’ The young are often united by relative poverty, a lack of jobs and an inadequate education. They are excluded socially even though they are integrated technologically. Their plight highlights the need to fundamentally reform education. We need a new political paradigm, new ways in which we work together, a politics of the street rather than of the committee room. The older generation, those over 55 are socially integrated, this has come about through their work and family, but these possibilities are no longer available for many of the young generation in the same way. The present education system is simply turning out more and more unemployed graduates. This is both a challenge and an opportunity. The ‘spring’, like the Arab spring, could quickly turn to autumn, a time of aridity and death. Schools are preparing for a world different to the one they were constructed to serve. The new generation have to create their own social glue and for this reason it is unfair to educate in the way we were used to. The recent action of students in Chile who took control of their schools was a measure of the discontent and disappointment at what education has offered them. At the same time in the western world we have seen a real paradigm shift with the advent of the first generation since the war that cannot look ahead to more prosperity. As the old model falls away there will be those who cling to old habits, for example a British education minister recently protested that ‘social and emotional education is ghastly’, but such a standpoint is to ignore exactly that which makes us human.

This should be the age of empathy. The writer Frans De Waal claims that we are all born empathetic, but the quality is destroyed, in part, by our education. The role of compassion is very important. Trust is what we value the most but young people can no longer trust in their future: we have a new generation that finds their trust in the world to be compromised. So their attention is diverted to other things that in themselves provide no lasting panacea. There

is a direct link between the growth in consumerism and the growth in mental disorders. 25% of young people in the developed world have an identifiable mental health problem, 10% have a mental disorder. Being a teacher is therefore a huge challenge, not least because these disorders create anti-social behaviour. Teachers now have to gain the respect of their pupils every day anew; they can no longer take it for granted. Part of this picture is a huge rise in instances of depression, especially in boys; girls appear to be more resilient, but boys have the tendency to draw in and stay there, girls have more supportive social networks.

A recent UNESCO report into adolescence acknowledged that the contemporary focus has been on primary education. Now we must turn to the ages of adolescence and youth. We should remind ourselves that every teenager is an idealist. It is noteworthy that the current protest movements have been about pensions and jobs; we did not see the children protest because they don't know how, but it is the children who suffer when art programmes are cut and the opportunities for creativity in an arts rich educational environment are lost. We are producing a time bomb for the future: the opportunity to play and be creative is being removed and the consequences are enormous. Of course it is not all bad news. It is now clearly acknowledged that the education of girls helps reduce poverty, and the huge reduction in infant mortality is a great achievement and a direct result of the UN declaration of the rights of the child.

We are moving from the old model of education-as-engineering that was designed to produce qualifications, towards one based on the education of the individual and their competencies, one that is much less general and much more individual. What can we do as teachers? Research in Ottawa, Canada, shows that the best way for education to improve is for teachers to work together, it is not outside pressure or league tables that drives up standards but teachers assessing each other and becoming conscious of their colleagues' work. The next step after this is when schools start learning from each other and becoming professional learning communities observing and responding to each other. We know that teachers learn and develop by listening to the children. We have to be interested in each other's discoveries and then comes enthusiasm. Children need to feel worthy as a result of their school and education. If they feel of worth they are better able to face challenges. Cutting creativity and art is an insult to human nature and to our children.

Howard Gardner in the `The Disciplined Mind` highlights the fact that we know in our bones the indices we generally use to measure success are insufficient and that education is really about the progression from recognition, to admiration, to a desire to pursue the truth and then beauty and goodness. This is the route that will help us all in dealing with the present issue of social divisiveness. Our final reminder of the need to engage with the challenges and opportunities we face comes from the Russian writer Yevgeny Yevtushenko: `Our children will not forgive us what we forgave. `